

“EMAIL NOT DESIGNED FOR ALL-PURPOSE COMMUNICATIONS.”



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Email - voicemail - or face to face: it is important to understand that how we choose to deliver communications is as important as the content of the message. Far too often, people will use the approach that is most comfortable or convenient for them, rather than what is most appropriate to the situation. This will usually be determined by their personality, style, or confidence level with interpersonal relationships. A human resource professional tells of two executives who did not get along very well and for months only communicated by email, although their offices were right down the hall from one another.

Email is designed to move high volume or time-sensitive communications quickly. It is best utilized for the myriad everyday issues that are transaction oriented, require only one-way information, or that need to be documented for future reference. Email by its very nature is less personal than a voice on the other end of the phone, or a face across the table, creating a natural distance. It should never be used for serious interpersonal issues such as conflict resolution, to reprimand, to terminate employment, or to convey any information that will impact someone personally or professionally.

Some people will use email instead of personal contact in order to keep a distance or to shield themselves from the discomfort of dealing with difficult issues. A ten-year field salesperson was stunned when he opened his email one morning to read the following message from his division manager: "I am sorry to inform you that effective this Friday, your position will be terminated due to business restructuring of our division. You will be receiving a packet by express mail today which will answer questions about your final paycheck and benefits. This situation is regrettable and I wish you the best in your future professional pursuits."

There are times, however, when the only way a person can address a sensitive situation is through email. Writing their thoughts down helps them to be more grounded and objective, and to be able to sort through their thoughts without the other person interrupting. It is one way that some people feel that they can be fully "heard." This will only work, however, if the intention of the communication is to gain clarity and understanding, rather than to maintain control or to put the other person on the defensive.

Those who avoid confrontation or want to maintain control will use email to their advantage until respectfully challenged. One can step up to the other person and respond with something like this: "John, it is impossible to dialogue effectively about this by email. Given the importance of this issue, and our working relationship, I suggest that we schedule a time to discuss in person to resolve. Are you available on Thursday afternoon?"

In our fast-moving work cultures we have developed an automatic habit of using email in place of personal communications, all-too-often using a transactional approach with issues that clearly affect people. When email is used inappropriately in this way, it creates misunderstanding, resentment or alienation. It is imperative, therefore, that we be aware of and differentiate between transactional issues, for which email is particularly fast and efficient, and relationship-oriented issues, which require personal contact.

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